

Agricultural Appraisal
for
Yorkley Court Community Farm
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The Appraisal

1) My qualifications and experience

I have been asked to appraise the plans for Yorkley Court Community Farm, due to my combination of qualifications and experience in the field of sustainable agriculture and low impact development. My academic study of sustainable agriculture is backed up by seventeen years of practical experience working at a variety of mixed farms and organic market gardens.

In 1999 I graduated with distinction from an MSc in Sustainable Agriculture at Wye College, University of London. I also hold a BSc (Hons.) degree in Geography from the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and have taken part in a Permaculture Design course, under Patrick Whitefield.

Since 1997 I have been working on mixed farms and organic market gardens between and alongside academic work. I learned organic horticulture on the job at a number of organic market gardens, before getting the opportunity to start my own enterprise first in Somerset, and later in West Sussex, giving me a total of six years experience as an independent grower. I've successfully sold vegetables through farmers markets, as well as supplying a prestigious farm shop at Cowdray Park in West Sussex and a network of other local shops and pubs.

For five years I lived at low impact community Tinkers Bubble, where I earned a living from vegetable growing and apple juice making, combined with subsistence milking, firewood management and other activities. The experience led me to write the book, "Surviving and Thriving on the Land: How to use your time and energy to run a successful smallholding", which was published by Green Books in 2008. In researching for this book I visited and studied in depth over thirty land based projects, to discover the how smallholders can run economically viable smallholdings, whilst sustaining their own physical and mental wellbeing. I therefore have a detailed understanding of the demands of mixed and horticultural smallholdings, as well as technical knowledge of organic production and land management practices.

I have been writing agricultural appraisals and participating in planning appeals for organic smallholdings and low impact agricultural dwellings since 2002, including cases such as Fivepenny Farm (Dorset), The Trading Post (Somerset), Trevalon Organic Vegetables (Cornwall), and Blackthorn Farm (Dorset) and the Ecological Land Co-operative's holdings at Greenham Reach (Devon).

2) Project Description

The primary aims of Yorkley Court Community Farm are to manage the land in a sustainable way, to develop and support local food and resource systems, to engage with the local community and to provide educational activities through sharing skills. I understand that the ownership of Yorkley Court has been unclear for many years, and is currently subject to a legal dispute. The current residents moved onto the land in 2012, and have been combining work on the land (horticulture, woodland management, poultry keeping) with gardening work for people in the local community and gaining experience in the various ventures they wish to develop. The fifteen residents propose to establish the following land-based enterprises over the next five years, with a view to providing them with a modest income on top of meeting their subsistence needs for food, fuel and medicinal herbs:

- Yorkley Court Community Garden (3 acres)
- Market garden (2 acres)
- Herb enterprise (0.25 acres)
- Mycogeneration (0.25 acres)
- Laying hens (0.5 acres)
- Woodland coppice and crafts (15 acres)
- Agroforestry tree nursery (0.5)
- Working horse enterprise (4)

I have read through the business plans provided for each of these enterprises, as well as the introductory notes, and understand that the income combined with the subsistence benefits they and the land provide (when given a financial value), enable each resident to have an equivalent income to an average private tenant in the Forest of Dean. A detailed breakdown of income and expenses shows how by living communally, using renewable energy and providing their own food, fuel and water, they are able to subsist on a significantly lower income than a typical Forest of Dean resident. For each of the business plans, a monetary value has been given to the projected subsistence contributions the enterprise will make to the community, even though in reality no money will change hands for most of the subsistence resources

3) Site Visit

I visited Yorkley Court on 5th May 2014, and was able to meet members of the community and walk around the site. The community is currently occupying 30 acres below the main farm at Yorkley Court, which consists of a field and a long strip of regenerating woodland and scrub. A further field, and the area around the farmhouse and barn are also being used by the community, although I understand that access to this land is less secure than to the main 30 acres on which the business plans are based. Horticultural activities were apparent in the first field, while the far field was being used for grazing the work horses. Two or three patches had been cleared in the scrubby land between the fields, and were also being cultivated.

The land appeared relatively poor, reflecting its history as a site for small scale coal mining, off-road military vehicle training and banger racing, and the central part has now been recolonised with brambles, goat willow and other scrub. On the south eastern edge, the scrub gives way to beech woodland. The far field showed signs of poor winter drainage, but appeared to have diverse flora and sufficient grass for the horses.

At present the residents occupy a complex of buildings centering on an old army Nissan hut, with accommodation being provided by yurts and caravans. A polytunnel next to the Nissan hut provides a propagation area. I was also shown the farm yard, the barn and goats, and the area around the farmhouse, where poultry is being kept. I understand that in future the poultry will be kept in the woodland and scrub areas.

4) Scope of Project

This project cannot be appraised as a straightforward agricultural business, due to the number of people and enterprises involved. Should it be allowed to proceed would provide a number of benefits which merit attention:

- Enterprise incubator – My experience at Tinkers' Bubble has shown me that low impact communities operate as ideal places for land based enterprises to be tried at low cost. Since land/infrastructure is shared and living costs are low, the capital

requirements are a fraction of those required to buy land and a house, or a farm. It is therefore possible to experiment with different land based enterprises at low financial risk. In this way, innovative ways of generating a livelihood can be explored. Several ex-residents of Tinkers' Bubble have gone on to establish successful land based businesses, which supply food and valued services to the local community. Each of the enterprises proposed here has the potential to provide goods and services from Yorkley Court, but maybe more significant will be the invaluable training for the people running it. The successes and failures of the enterprises at Yorkley Court will give them the experience and confidence to develop their skills elsewhere in the future, even if they don't remain at Yorkley Court for the rest of their lives.

- Positive Land Use – It appears that this site has had a chequered recent history, with disputed ownership and uses ranging from underground and open cast coal mining to military use and rally driving. While it could be argued that the current natural regeneration is sufficient environmental benefit, in my view, the proposed enterprises would both further enhance the biodiversity of the site as well as providing modest livelihoods and training for fifteen people. At a time when unemployment among young people is high, this must be seen a positive benefit.
- Sustainability – Sustainability is at the centre of this proposal, with those involved being prepared to live very simple lives on low incomes in order to reduce their environmental impact and derive their needs directly from the land. Should the fifteen people be required to live in conventional houses, their ecological footprint would escalate dramatically, due to their need to use mains electricity, travel more to find work to pay for rent and consume more products not directly produced from the land. As an example, by December 2014, in their fourth year of operation, the low impact project Lammas in Pembrokeshire achieved an ecological footprint of 1.52 global hectares/capita, and are on course to have a much lower footprint by the end of 2014 (Lammas 2013). For comparison, the average ecological footprint in the UK is 4.5 (Global Footprint Network).
- Climate Change – Evidence suggests that organic farming and conservation can result in significant carbon sequestration, though the storing of carbon in soil

organic matter, hedgerows and field margins (Farm Carbon Cutting Toolkit 2013). The soil building, woodland management and biochar making activities proposed by YCCF, would all contribute to storing carbon. In addition, fifteen people living from simple renewable electricity and wood fuelled heating systems, and not needing to travel to work, would emit dramatically fewer carbon emissions than the same number of people living in conventional houses.

- Education and Community Impact – The business plans indicate that the community is committed to building links with the wider community, not only providing food and craft products, but also landbased learning and volunteering opportunities. In the long term they propose offering a range of community resources, including craft work shop facilities, a farm shop, compost and locally saved seeds, and a processing barn. They are already engaged with local primary school, a youth cafe in Lydney, and individuals offer gardening and landscape services. Allowing the education and skill sharing proposals at Yorkley Court to develop while they could act as a catalyst for local people who would like to reduce their environmental impact.
- Supplies for the city – While their immediate marketing emphasis is local, it is clear from the business plans that opportunities already exist to sell produce in Bristol.

5) National Policy Context

As this is an application for dwellings in the open countryside, the key national policy relating to this case is Paragraph 55 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2012:

“To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities.Local planning authorities should avoid new isolated homes in the countryside unless there are special circumstances such as:
· *The essential need for a rural worker to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside;”*

I will therefore consider whether it is essential for the residents of Yorkley Court community

to live on site to carry out their proposed businesses.

On balance the NPPF 2012 is broadly supportive of this initiative, since it has sustainable development at its heart, and hence is in line with the overall “Presumption in favour of sustainable development” and also addresses issues covered by the following chapters:

- Building a strong, competitive economy (Chapter 1)
- Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change (Chapter 10)
- Conserving and enhancing the natural environment (Chapter 11)

6) Essential need

This rural initiative combines labour intensive enterprises with low impact, community living. Such an initiative is only possible if those involved in the project are living on-site due to the detailed demands of the enterprises, the integrated nature of their sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles, and the difficulty in finding affordable accommodation close enough to meet those demands. I therefore consider residential permission essential for the Yorkley Court Community Farm initiative to go ahead as proposed.

The needs of each enterprise vary, and some need more “out of hours” attention than others. However, it would be impossible for one person to be able to attend to the emergency needs of all eight enterprises, due to the specialised knowledge that each enterprise entails. Furthermore, at certain times of year, it would be unreasonable to expect a person who was flat out busy with their own projects to attend to the emergencies of an enterprise with which they were unfamiliar.

Examples of specific functional needs are mentioned in each of the business plans, and I can confirm from my own experience and from having worked with numerous smallholders on planning issues that these are typical and necessary requirements for onsite residence. For example, the market garden requires a range of early morning and late night activities, including irrigation, planting, harvesting and slug control, while poultry keeping necessitates vigilance against foxes, especially at dawn and dusk.

However, in the case of Yorkley Court, it is also the overall functioning of a low impact community that also necessitates on-site residence. Without living in low impact dwellings, using renewable energy for electricity and sharing resources, the residents could not possibly achieve the level of sustainability they seek.

7) Financial Viability

This is a community project involving start-up land based livelihoods for 15 people on a 30 acre farm, in conjunction with the provision of environmental and craft education, community services and highly sustainable lifestyles . Many would argue that 30 acres is too small an area for a couple, let alone 15 people to generate a livelihood. In response to similar such questioning, the Ecological Land Co-operative commissioned a study of the viability of smallholder enterprises of ten acres and less, and gathered case studies of market gardens, soft fruit, poultry, apple juice, cut flower and mushroom businesses operating profitably, some on as little as than a quarter acre, which are published in its report “Small is Successful” (Maxey et al. 2011).

Throughout the UK people are pioneering highly productive, labour intensive enterprises on very small pieces of land, mainly in urban as opposed to rural areas, and turning previously derelict land into productive gardens. For example at Allen Gardens, in Hackney, an income of just over £9,700 was generated from sales of salad leaves and other vegetables, from a total land area of 0.2hectares (Griggs 2012, p31). On other farms, diversification is leading to a variety of value adding activities including direct marketing, hospitality and the offering of educational courses, all of which make it possible to create a viable business on a small area of land. It seems that rural profitability is not related to land area, but to enterprise imagination, organisation and hard work. I include such examples to illustrate that this group is by no means exceptional in hoping to generate fifteen livelihoods from 30 acres.

However, to view Yorkley Court Community Farm purely as a set of viable businesses is to miss the point of the initiative, which is to enable young people to develop the skills to manage land sustainably, to minimise their personal environmental impact, to provide food and craft products for themselves and the local community, and thereby derive a livelihood. While economic viability is an aim, a high level of profitability is not a priority.

It is with these thoughts in mind that I have read the business proposals for the enterprises planned at Yorkley Court. Residents have been modest in their projections of what they can earn from their various enterprises, which is wise, since at present the soil needs building up before it is able to deliver high yields. This is what I would term a “low and slow business” in that capital investment is low, meaning that time and labour must be invested in building of infrastructure, soil development, tree propagation and planting, herb propagation etc, and returns will take a long time to materialise. However, when they do, they will be steady and reliable, and individuals will not have to service debts on loans taken out for business development (See Maxey et al. 2011, p42).

Members of the community have come up with an ingenious formula for demonstrating how they can be financially viable on such low incomes, by giving value to the subsistence benefits they gain from the land, calculating the financial requirements they have and comparing this to the typical income of a Forest of Dean resident. It demonstrates that when the costs of living in a conventional house and having to travel to work are taken into account, the surplus income available to both Yorkley Court and Forest of Dean residents is roughly the same. While £1,687 may seem an inconceivably low monetary income to most people, I know from having lived at Tinker's Bubble, that when living in a low impact, communal way and relying on subsistence to meet many needs, it is possible to live on very little money.

Another feature of the enterprises at Yorkley Court is that many of them are mutually dependent, with biproducts being passed on to other businesses, such as manure from the horses being used in the gardens, waste vegetables being fed to the chickens and bean poles/pea sticks from the woodland management being used in the market garden. The outputs for some of them may be more useful to the internal economy than for sale externally, while other enterprises may have a more successful trading relationship with the outside world, yet be reliant on products from the internal economy. It is therefore not appropriate to judge each enterprise entirely separately, since they are all part of a whole farm economic plan.

Any of these enterprises could work, given the hard work and dedication of those involved. If given a period of temporary permission, I believe that over time the enterprise mix might

change, with some activities being found to be more successful and profitable than others, while new ideas might also be tried. I would say, therefore, that based on the aim of generating a net income of £1600 per business, to cover the personal living expenses of each resident, this proposal as a whole is planned on a sound financial basis.

8) Material Considerations

Access to Land – Land in the UK is among the most concentrated in Europe, with the average area of farms being over 2000 acres (Eurostat 18/2011). The cost of farms with accommodation and buildings makes it prohibitively expensive for young people without a farming background to enter the profession, while opportunities to rent land with associated affordable housing, following training, are few and far between.

Aging population of farmers - 58% of farmers are aged 55 or more and only 3% are younger than 35 years (European Commission 2014). This startling statistic illustrates the urgency of encouraging more young people into agriculture. While many children of farming families are choosing not to follow their parents into conventional farming, small scale and organic farms are attracting new entrants (Maynard and Green 2006, p53). As noted above, the price of land makes it difficult for new entrants to gain a foothold in farming, a problem made worse since many of the County Farms, which used to provide start up opportunities, have been sold. Opportunities such as those offered at Yorkley Court, are invaluable for enterprising young people who want to step up from their training and employment on other peoples's farms to running their own businesses.

9) Relevant Planning Decisions

A number of planning decisions relate to this case in that either they concern communities, or low impact ecological livelihoods or both. Those concerning communities include:

- Tinkers Bubble, Somerset – This low impact community manages 40 acres of woodland, pasture, gardens, and orchards without using fossil fuels, while residents live in low impact homes, use renewable electricity and minimise car use. It was granted temporary permission in July 1998, and a further ten years temporary

permission in 2004. In his appeal decision report, the Inspector considered that, *“The alternative lifestyle and the form of agriculture are manifestly part of the one experiment. It therefore follows that the Appellants, if they are to make this experiment, need to live on their land in the countryside. My conclusion is therefore that the appellants do have a special need.”* The eventual decision, made by the Area North Planning Committee of South Somerset District Council (July 1998), was based on the fact that members recognised that continuing experimental use was *“a significant benefit in agricultural terms and to meeting the desired objectives and the spirit of Agenda 21”*. Councillors considered that the experiment would fail if workers did not live on the site, and that *“if it does eventually fail, no long term damage would have been caused to this area of the countryside”*. Furthermore, they agreed with the Inspector's decision that *“a dangerous precedent was unlikely to be established as only the most committed would choose to follow such a lifestyle”*.

- Steward Community Woodland (1 June 2009, APP/J9497/C/08/2083419-28) – The grounds upon which a second round of temporary permission were granted to this woodland permaculture community by Inspector Brian Cook were, *“that the venture has evolved into one where the education resource provided by what is, in effect, a demonstration project of permaculture principles being applied in practice, is of significant wider benefit”* and *“having regard to the total reliance on renewable energy sources and reclaimed/reused materials I believe the development meets many of the national policy objectives concerning sustainable development”*.
- Land Matters, Totnes, Devon (23rd August 2007, APP/K1128/C/06/2032148 and 2039820) – Inspector Alan Woolnough recognised that the range of proposals in the planning application by this permaculture and educational community, *“if fully realised could contribute substantially to the advancement of this important strand of environmental science, with the notable bi-product of refining sustainable agriculture practices applicable well outside the confines of agriculture. Of particular significance is the educational role that this undertaking aims to fulfil, with its scope to not only host school trips but also to assist more advanced research”*. He allowed the appeal for temporary permission, concluding that, *“the advancement of*

permaculture and sustainable ways of living facilitated by this project have sufficient potential value to outweigh the limited harm to other interests of acknowledged importance". Temporary permission was granted.

- Quickenwood, Blackboys, Framfield, East Sussex TN22 5HG (APP/C1435/C/03/1114412) – This appeal concerned two couples aiming to establish “a holistic, sustainable and subsistence based rural lifestyle” on one hectare of woodland and a field in East Sussex. They were carrying out remedial conservation work on the woodland, making artist's charcoal, growing organic vegetables, fruit and herbs according to permaculture principles, and keeping chickens and goats for subsistence. Inspector Bridget Campbell concluded that the couple, “*have an underlying objective of living in a sustainable and ultimately self-sufficient lifestyle requiring a holistic approach*”, and that were the Appellants to live elsewhere, “*the holistic approach would be lost, and much of what the appellants seek to achieve, particularly in relation to recycling and utilisation of renewable energy, could not be realised to the same degree in a conventional dwelling*”. Therefore, she concluded, “*the fundamental aims behind the Appellant's venture on this site cannot be achieved unless they are to live their and in that respect a functional, if unconventional, need for the dwellings can be said to exist*”. Temporary permission was granted.

The following planning decisions relate to projects where a subsistence livelihood is supplemented by commercial elements, permaculture projects involving an educational element and projects where inspectors found a functional need even though more than one family was involved:

- *Ourganics Evolving Systems, Litton Cheney, Dorset* – Following a period of temporary permission, Ms. Pat Bowcock was given permanent permission at Committee (West Dorset District Council) in November 2009. This was on the grounds of the multiple functional needs of a mixed horticultural, poultry and educational site, and the need to be resident to fulfil the demonstration function of the permaculture project.
- *Pentiddy Woodland Project, Liskeard, Cornwall* – This permaculture smallholding

and woodland crafts project was given permanent permission by Caradon District Council in November 2009, after four years of temporary permission. The project includes woodland management, permaculture courses and a forest school, greenwood furniture making, off-site hedge laying, subsistence smallholding (vegetables, chickens, sheep) and a woodland burial site. The functional need centres on the necessity of dwelling on site to demonstrate the application of permaculture principles in achieving a sustainable lifestyle, and this was considered at committee level to be sufficient grounds for granting planning permission. (Allowed at Committee).

- Fivepenny Farm, Wootton Fitzpaine, Dorset (1st April 2005 APP/F1230/C/04/1162420, 1159852 and 1162421) – At the appeal for two agricultural workers' dwellings on this mixed organic farm, Inspector B.C.Wilkinson decided that *“the diversity and character of this enterprise is bound to give rise not only to the occasional emergency, but also to a constant stream of smaller problems”* and concluded, *“on balance, that taking into account the nature of the enterprise, the early stage in its development, and the character and location of the appeal site, the only practicable and available solution to the needs I have identified is for both families to live on that site”*. Fivepenny Farm was granted permanent permission on the same grounds of functional need in August 2009.
- Greenham Reach, Holcom Rogus, Devon (4th April 2013 APP/Y1138/A/12/2181808) - The most recent low impact planning decision relevant to Yorkley Court, is that made by Inspector Jessica Graham in favour of three agricultural workers' dwellings in association with smallholdings held by the Ecological Land Co-operative. Each smallholding planned a range of agricultural enterprises, similar to those proposed at Yorkley Court, and Inspector Graham stated, *“I accept that the labour-intensive nature of such practices, necessary to ensure that a sustainable livelihood could be developed without resort to agro-chemicals and reliance on fossil fuels, would require the worker’s presence and involvement to such an extent that the need could only be met by living on-site.”* As at Fivepenny Farm, the Inspector did not see it as reasonable to expect one person to see to emergency and out of hours activities of a neighbour's enterprise, even though they were living on the same land.

10) Conclusion

The proposed enterprises at Yorkley Court are ambitious, but achievable if members of the community are able to live on site. While their financial aspirations are modest, the skill and hard work required to implement this range of business plans, and to improve this piece of land, will be considerable. Nevertheless, I believe that the types of enterprises proposed are entirely feasible when the people involved are committed and determined, as these people appear to be. Many of them already have considerable relevant experience and training, and the fact that they have already lived here for two years despite challenges to their rights to the land, shows their determination. However, I firmly believe that the residential element of the project is essential both to the viability of the businesses, and the integrity of the project as a whole. The inefficiencies and stress, not to mention the expense of travelling to and fro several times per day, mean that individual elements and the whole project would very soon founder if they were forced to live elsewhere. Furthermore, it would be impossible to achieve the environmental benefits promised by the current proposal.

One of the main conclusions of my book “Surviving and Thriving on the Land” is that the best model for long term success of smallholdings is for them to locate in clusters, so that the benefits of community (helping each other in times of need, sharing resources and trading byproducts) can be enjoyed whilst each smallholder has sovereignty and decision making power over their own business. I see the proposed consortium of linked, yet independent, enterprises at Yorkley Court has much in common with those smallholding “clusters” I found operating during my research. The mutual support elements of this model are of particular benefit in enabling single people, those with young children and older people to operate agricultural enterprises. Hence, an initiative such as Yorkley Court Community Farm has a role in increasing access to rural livelihoods for a wider range of people than are involved in agriculture at present. At a time when young people and new entrants are desperately needed to replace retiring farmers, a proposal such as this should be welcomed.

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